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Refugees from Somalia in Buffalo

Abstract

Somalia is a country that has been divided by civil war since the 1980s. It began due to resistance to the regime of Siad Barre. Once he was overthrown in the 1980s, the resulting power vacuum led to violence. Peace efforts from multi-national groups, neighboring countries, and the United Nations have been attempted, but violence continues and has forced many to flee the country for safety. Somalia is one of the most homogenous countries in Africa. Approximately 85% of the country's population are ethnic Somalis and practice the Sunni Muslim religion, while the remaining 15% are made up of various ethnic groups. The largest of these is the Somali Bantus, a pastoral clan descended from slaves brought into Somalia from southeastern African countries. Some Bantu have held onto their cultural heritage, while others have been integrated into the Somali culture. Bantus face varying degrees of discrimination and persecution due to their background.

Keywords

Buffalo, Data/Demographics/History, Populations and Cultural Groups, Demographics and Data, Fact Sheet, PPG, PDF

Refugees from Somalia in Buffalo



Please note that this is a rough-and-ready guide, and that these facts will not be applicable to all Somali refugees that you meet.

Background: Somali and Somali-Bantu Refugees

Somalia is a country that has been divided by civil war since the 1980s. It began due to resistance to the regime of Siad Barre. Once he was overthrown in the 1980s, the resulting power vacuum led to violence. Peace efforts from multi-national groups, neighboring countries, and the United Nations have been attempted, but violence continues and has forced many to flee the country for safety.

Somalia is one of the most homogenous countries in Africa. Approximately 85% of the country's population are ethnic Somalis and practice the Sunni Muslim religion, while the remaining 15% are made up of various ethnic groups. The largest of these is the Somali Bantus,

a pastoral clan descended from slaves brought into Somalia from southeastern African countries. Some Bantu have held onto their cultural heritage, while others have been integrated into the Somali culture. Bantus face varying degrees of discrimination and persecution due to their background.

Somali Refugees in Buffalo

- Since 2003, New York State has resettled over 3,600 Somali refugees, with 705 in the 2014 fiscal year. Many of these settled in Buffalo.
- As of 2015, over 600 Somali-Bantu individuals reside on Buffalo's West Side.¹

Cultural Attributes

Religious Tradition and Belief Systems

The common religions practiced throughout the country of Somalia include Islam and Christianity, but animist and traditional folk spirituality remain a part of the lives of both Somali and Somali-Bantu.

Somali

Sunni Islam is the most common religious tradition among Somalis.² A strong tradition of "tariqa" (mystical Islam; Sufism) also exists among Somali Muslims.³ Islamic fundamentalism has been increasing in popularity in recent years.

The Islamic tradition prohibits the consumption of alcohol, although it is not uncommon for individuals to partake. Specific rituals for meat preparation are prescribed in the Koran. Many Somali individuals prefer to purchase meat from *halal* butchers who understand and follow these traditions.⁴ Ramadan, a month-long Islamic holiday, is a time for fasting from daybreak to sunset. It oftentimes involves prayer and meditation and is considered the holiest month of the Islamic year.

The Five Pillars of Islam

Shahadah: profession of faith in God

Salah: prayer towards Makkah, Islam's holiest city

Zakat: almsgiving, service to God

Sawm: fasting during the holy month of Ramadan

Hajj: the pilgrimage to Makkah

Somali Bantu

Bantu ancestors were animist. However, slavery has changed the Bantus' religious traditions. Because of Islamic laws forbidding Muslims to own Muslim slaves, many Bantu slaves converted to Islam in order to escape slavery.⁵ Most Bantu people had converted to Islam by the early 1900s.⁶

Social and Familial Values

Among both Somali and Somali-Bantu groups, family plays an important role. Both cultures tend to be patriarchal, with men acting as head of household.

Somali

Marriages may be either arranged or personal choice. Many Somali individuals live with extended family. Children are an important part of the family, and women's status and influence increases based on the number of children she bears. Although women do work, the preferred arrangement is for the man to work and for the woman to stay at home with the children.

Although there are a variety of "clans" based on ancestry and culture that are represented in Somalia, due to the history of conflict among different ethnic groups it is considered disrespectful to refer to "clans" or "tribes". As opposed to asking which "clan" an individual from Somalia comes from, it is best to simply ask general questions related to the cultural background of the individual. Intermarriage between "clans" is not uncommon.

In Somalia it is common for children to freely play and explore the neighborhood, with the expectation that the village is safe and neighbors will look out for the children. Upon moving to America, Somali mothers may expect the same safety and security from the community, and must be advised of the potential dangers here.

Somali Bantu

Tribal identity is an important part of the Bantu Culture. These identities are derived from their ancestral country of origin.⁷ In addition, most identify themselves by their place of residence within Somalia, which typically corresponds with their kin grouping. In some cases, those who lived in the vicinity of nomadic Somali clans integrated with them, in order to gain a sense of protection.⁸ However, discrimination against the Bantus in Somalia prevented intermarrying with other groups. This 'second-class citizen' status also affected Bantu peoples' representation in politics and access to government services.

There are typically two types of marriage in Bantu culture: *aroos fadhi*, which is consensual and formally arranged by parents, and *msafa*, which is similar to the concept of elopement.⁹ Polygamy is practiced in Somali Bantu culture.

A Somali Bantu family typically includes mother, father, between four and eight children, grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins.¹⁰ Most adults consider themselves members of more than one family. The Bantu culture tends to operate as a patriarchal society in which father is the main provider and mother is the general manager of domestic affairs.

Language, Literacy and Education

Somali

The Somali written language was not developed until the 1970s. Prior to this, employment opportunities were limited to the privileged elite that had been taught the colonial languages of English and/or Italian.¹¹ More recently, English education has begun to flourish in Somalia.

Somali Bantu

Swahili is a primary language of the Bantu ethnic group.¹² However, the Bantu come from a predominantly oral society with little knowledge of written language, and the agricultural focus of the Bantu culture has led to little need for, and therefore limited access to, formal education in Somalia.¹³

The languages spoken by Somali refugees varies based on region of Somalia that they lived. These languages include:

- Somali (most prevalent, includes two major dialects)
- Arabic
- English and/or Italian (among those who have received formal education)
- Swahili

Employment Skills and Experiences

Somali

Generally speaking, women take care of the finances and the children.¹⁴ However, women are increasingly working outside the home due to financial hardship. Indeed, there is a stronger support network and more flexibility for women working outside the home in Somalia than in the United States.¹⁵ Somalis who have immigrated to the United States and found work will often send back money to family, friends, and even neighbors.

Somali Bantu

In Somalia, it is difficult to gain employment. Employment opportunities are in the urban areas and typically require affiliation (through friends or family) with an organization in order to obtain employment.¹⁶ For Bantus, who predominantly live in rural settings, have little to no formal education, and experience discrimination in the cities, employment is nearly impossible to obtain.¹⁷

Medical Information

Religious healing, according to the Quran, is common among both Somali and Somali-Bantu Muslims.¹⁸

Somali

Traditional medicine is commonly used in combination with Islamic healing practices. Traditional healers are typical elder men in the community.¹⁹ The use of herbal remedies, fire-burning and prayer are typically used to address illnesses.

Child-bearing is an important part of the Somali culture. A woman's status is enhanced when she becomes pregnant. Birth will then typically take place at home with a midwife.²⁰

Somali Bantu

Somali Bantus tend to observe animist beliefs in combination with Islamic practices.²¹ Bantus will typically attribute illness or ailment to spirits, and use spiritual and herbal remedies to address them.

In Bantu culture, pregnancy is seen as a blessing from God. Therefore, contraception and family planning tend to be unfamiliar concepts to most.²² Babies are typically breast-fed for about 6 months. Circumcision of both males and females is considered an important rite of passage.

Resettlement Experiences

In working with refugees of any culture, it is important to bear in mind that symptoms of PTSD (Post-traumatic stress disorder) are common, often due to experiences of torture, imprisonment, violence and interrogation. In addition, the loss or separation of families may add to the difficulties in adjusting to the new culture.¹

Somali

The housing provided to refugee clients is often viewed as unnecessarily large. A sense of belonging to a community is very important to Somalis who have been recently resettled in America. Ethnic differences can cause tension among Somalis, Somali- Bantus, other refugee groups and African-Americans.²³

Somali Bantu

Bantu peoples have a history of displacement, the most recent, of course, being resettlement to the U.S. The first family arrived in the Buffalo in 2003, and the current population of Somali Bantus in Buffalo come from just 5 family lines.²⁴

Relatively few Somalis living in Buffalo have received education past primary school, and those that have are predominantly male.²⁵ Academic support for English language learners can often be a challenge. Additionally, a lack of understanding of cultural and religious traditions can lead to tension and conflict at school and even negatively affect the emotional well-being and mental health of students.²⁶

In general, it is important not to make assumptions about an individual's level of competency with Western amenities, but rather to assess them individually.

Local Resources

WNY Muslim Association

4011 Bailey Avenue, Buffalo, NY 14226

WNYMuslims serves the Western New York community by creating awareness, encouraging diversity, and providing service. We empower Muslims and non-Muslims with the means to voice, connect, and contribute through creative media.

Somali-Bantu Community Organization of Buffalo

83 Grant Street, Buffalo, NY

A non-profit in Buffalo that helps individuals from the Somali-Bantu communities to adjust to American culture while maintaining their cultural identities and traditions.

The Somali Bantu Project – Health Education for Somali Bantu Refugees

A partnership of several Buffalo healthcare and educational facilities, “to improve fundamentals of care for refugee children.

International Institute of Buffalo (IIB)

864 Delaware Ave, Buffalo, NY 14209

iib@iibuff.org (716)883-1900

“The IIB seeks to strengthen Western New York by assisting refugees and immigrants to become independent, informed and contributing members of the community, and by promoting and supporting cultural competence, multiculturalism and global connectedness throughout the region.” The IIB offers translation and interpretation services.

Catholic Charities (CC)

20 Herkimer St. Buffalo, NY 14213

(716) 842-0270

“Our Resettlement clients arrive in the United States through the auspices of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops/Migration Refugee Services (USCCB/MRS). Pre- and post-arrival services such as assistance with housing, food, clothing and employment are provided.”

Journey’s End Refugee Services, Inc. (JERS)

2495 Main St #317, Buffalo, NY 14214

(716) 882-4963

JERS “provides refugees with the resources and support they need to become successful, active and contributing members of the Western New York Community.”

Jewish Family Services (JFS)

70 Barker St, Buffalo, NY 14209
(716) 883-1914

Jewish Family Service assists families new to the US during the difficult transition to the American way of life. JFS provides employment services, ESL training, assistance in acquiring health care and social support services as well as public school enrollment and mental health support.

Jericho Road Community Health Center

184 Barton St., Buffalo, NY 14213
(716)-348-3000

Jericho Road offers a variety of health services to low-income and refugee families. The services range from healthcare for new mothers, to general case management, support in filling out forms, ESL education or educational support for a range of ages.

Coordinated Refugee/Asylee Legal Services (The CRLS Project)

237 Main Street, Suite 1015, Buffalo, NY 14203
(716)853-3087

A collaboration of legal service providers to support immigrants and refugees with civil and immigration legal services.

NOTES

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- ²⁵ Id.
- ²⁶ Id.

This fact sheet is one in a series of “snap shots” of Buffalo’s immigrant and refugee populations, made possible by a grant from the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo. They are free of charge at www.ppgbuffalo.org/publications.

The fact sheets in the series are:

- **Nepali Bhutanese Refugees in Buffalo**
- **Burman, Karen, and Chin Refugees: From Burma to Buffalo**
- **Eritrean Refugees in Buffalo**
- **From Puerto Rico to Buffalo**
- **Refugees from Sudan in Buffalo**
- **Yemeni Immigrants in Western New York**
- **Refugees from Somalia in Buffalo**
- **Refugees from Iraq in Buffalo**
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